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TAGS: SCUL PREL LH

SUBJECT: PLANS FOR SNIPISKES CEMETERY - A CHANCE FOR PROTECTED STATUS, BUT MUCH WORK TO BE DONE

REF: VILNIUS 909 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Political and Economic Section Chief Rebecca Dunham for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The GOL's working group on the Snipiskes cemetery recently finished its work and submitted its conclusions to the Prime Minister. At the group's recommendation, the Prime Minister issued a decree calling for the establishment of a committee of experts to research the boundaries of the former cemetery. Unfortunately, he has not placed anyone in charge of the process. So far at least, no Ministry seems willing to take the lead. End summary.

¶2. (C) For several months, an intra-ministerial working group met to find a way forward on the Snipiskes cemetery issue. The process was marred by two factors. First was the desire on the part of the Vilnius municipality (in the person of Mayor Arturas Zuokas) to move forward quickly with development of the site, without regard to religious or cultural concerns. Second was the unwillingness of any governmental organization to take the lead in finding a solution.

¶3. (C) Post has made tremendous headway on the first problem by convincing the Mayor of the need to work with the international Jewish community to find a way forward that will be acceptable to most, if not all, parties (reftel). During a meeting with the American Jewish Committee's Rabbi Andrew Baker on September 28, Zuokas even agreed to invite to Vilnius two experts in the preservation of and development around Jewish cemeteries. Post is working to facilitate that visit, which we hope will take place in the coming weeks.

¶4. (C) The second problem was compounded by a change in government this summer, and the resultant change in ministers and vice ministers (one of whom chaired the working group). The Foreign Ministry, out of frustration that no other ministry would take the lead, recently sent a paper to the Prime Minister outlining the work and conclusions of the working group. Inter alia, the group requested that the municipality halt any development of the site until the GOL has determined a solution; researched similar situations in other European cities; and requested the assistance of the Israeli government in solving the problem. Its conclusions suggest the following course of action:

-- First, form a committee of experts to determine the precise borders of the former cemetery. This group would be comprised of people from Lithuania's Cultural Heritage Protection Department, Justice Ministry, History Institute, National Museum, and other organizations. It would review a wide range of archives and maps, and might request that the Israeli government provide relevant experts to assist them;

-- Second, prepare a map of the cemetery's boundaries in

order to be able to represent the GOL in talks with the international Jewish community;

-- Third, define a status for the former cemetery's grounds under existing Lithuanian laws regarding sites of cultural value; and

-- Fourth, register the site under this status, so that it can benefit from the protections provided by Lithuanian law.

¶15. (C) Based on the MFA's report, on September 21 PM Kirkilas directed the Environment Ministry, the Culture Ministry, and the Vilnius county government (which reports to the central government) to work with the municipality to form the group of experts. So far, the response has not been encouraging. According to the Prime Minister's Assistant Vilius Kavaliauskas, the Ministry of Culture replied to the decree on October 11, saying, essentially, that because the site does not have any formal cultural status now, there is nothing that the Ministry can do to assist. (Culture Minister Jucas was unaware of the issue when the Ambassador raised it during an October 3 courtesy call.) Kavaliauskas told us October 13 that neither the Environment Ministry nor the county government had replied yet.

¶16. (C) Jolanda Kriskoviciene, a Counselor in the MFA who has responsibility for Jewish Affairs, told us on October 12 that the PM had not designated any one person or Ministry as the lead on this issue. She speculated that Kavaliauskas, who has handled Jewish affairs in the PM's office for at least two administrations, might be named to oversee the experts' committee. Kavaliauskas later told us that no one had been appointed, but that the PM might do so in the future. He pleaded for our understanding, saying that the PM has not had time to focus on this issue yet. He hoped to be able to

brief the PM fully soon.

Comment

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¶17. (C) The news from the Prime Minister's office is disappointing, but this story is far from over. For the time being, no new construction can begin at the site, due to the protection provided to the Sports Palace, which stands on it, by the Cultural Heritage Protection Department. Ukio Bankas, the current owner, is appealing that decision, but that process will take time. The municipality still badly wants to buy the property, but needs to find the money to do so. This gives us time to continue to work the issue. The mayor's office seems to have seen the light, and we will continue working with them to bring experts in who can advise them on a course of action that would likely be acceptable to most interested groups, including much of the international Jewish community. At the same time, it is now clear that we will need to urge the Kirkilas government to address the problem in a more organized way: by appointing someone with authority to oversee the committee of experts, and convince the relevant ministries to cooperate fully.

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